

SUMMARY REPORT

High School Students Have Parents, Too

*A study of the relationship between parents and high school academic achievement
in the Fayette County Public Schools*

*Presented by the
Youth News Team
Of*



The Kentucky Conference for Community and Justice

In partnership with

Prichard Committee
for Academic Excellence

Lexington, Kentucky
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The Youth News Team



Top row, left to right: Michelle Schnack, Chauncey Morton, Debra Morton, Dennis Pearce, Susan Warren, Emily Warren. Bottom row, left to right: Tony Rawlings, Amy Nickell, Kim Rawlings, Jenny Hafley, Tiffany Duncan, Casandra Woodall and Rachel Belin.

Rachel Belin
Director

Tiffany Duncan
P.L. Dunbar High School student

Jenny Hafley
Sayre High School student

Debra Morton
Henry Clay High School parent

Chauncey Morton
Henry Clay High School student

Hilary Morton
Lafayette High School student

Amy Nickell
Bryan Station High School parent

Dennis Pearce
Tates Creek High School parent

Kim Rawlings
Lafayette High School parent

Tony Rawlings
Lafayette High School parent

Michelle Schnack
University of Kentucky intern

William (Bill) Steinman
Lafayette High School parent

Emily Warren
Lafayette High School student

Susan Warren
Lafayette High School parent

Casandra Woodall
Henry Clay High School student

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For the full Youth News Team report, go to www.youthnewsteam.com.

Background of the Youth News Team

Who We Are

The Youth News Team consists of an intergenerational group of Central Kentuckians aiming to amplify the voices of young people in education policy discussions. Parents and high school students from the leadership programs of the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence and the Kentucky Conference for Community and Justice (KCCJ) joined forces on the 2005 Youth News Team to investigate the relationship of parents to high school student achievement.

Who Our Collaborating Agencies Are

Though they have different areas of emphasis, both KCCJ and the Prichard Committee are non-profit, non-partisan, Kentucky-based organizations dedicated to supporting active citizen engagement to enrich our communities.

KCCJ dedicates itself to eliminating bias, bigotry and racism and promoting understanding for all people in Kentucky. KCCJ's student leadership program, the Lexington Youth Leadership Academy (LYLA), trains high school students to develop and exercise their voices in social justice issues. The Youth News Team serves as the LYLA ambassadors' "change agent" project; it is an opportunity for students to apply what they have learned after several years of leadership training.

The Prichard Committee focuses its effort on improving Kentucky schools. Its parent leadership program, the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership (CIPL), trains and supports parents as advocates for all children in the public schools.

What We Did

During the 2005 school year, we examined the relationship of parents to high school students' academic achievement using a variety of methods. We gathered qualitative and quantitative data by:

- Reviewing existing studies on the topic
- Developing research-based surveys that were distributed to students in Fayette County's public high schools and to a representative sample of Fayette County public high school parents.
- Interviewing parents, teachers, administrators and local and national policy experts and
- Facilitating focus groups with high school students across the academic spectrum.

Why We Did It

As students and parents, we have the most at stake in the outcome of education policies, but we are rarely consulted on them. We wrote this report in part to demonstrate our profound potential to contribute to school improvement.

Introduction

Do high school students need the support of their parents to do well academically?

To the 3,883 Fayette County Public School teens polled by the Youth News Team, the answer is obvious: 69 percent of them said they believe that most high school students do *not* need their parents to help them do well in school.

But although it may not be readily apparent to the students themselves, a large body of evidence suggests that parent involvement can improve high school achievement and behavior and directly influence a student's grades.

So what's to explain this disconnect between high school students' perceptions and the research?

Given the overall lack of clarity on the subject among their elders, perhaps it's inevitable. After all, parents who at one time read their children books every night before bed, made sure their homework was done and readily chaperoned elementary and middle school field trips are themselves often left to wonder what exactly parent involvement is supposed to look like at the high school level.

Ironically, it was in soliciting students and parents for this report that the Youth News Team discovered-- despite this general confusion—that there are specifics defining the relationship between academically successful students and their parents. Consider some survey highlights:

- 69% of students with a grade point average (GPA) of 3.5 or higher (equivalent to a B-plus) report having parents who regularly help them select classes.
- Students with GPAs of at least 3.5 are nearly twice as likely to report having parents who sometimes or frequently attend school events as students with GPAs below 2.0 (equivalent to a C).
- 61% of students with GPAs over 3.5 report sitting down with their families three or more times per week for dinner.

The qualitative information is just as compelling. One senior offered encouraging advice for parents navigating their relationships with adolescents:

Be a little nosey...Don't feel bad for asking questions, because it feels good to know someone cares.

The notion that parents play an important but difficult-to-define role was underscored poignantly by a freshman we interviewed in a Fayette County alternative school. The self-proclaimed bookworm who had just come back from the brink of dropping out and struggled mightily with her own relationship with her parents, advised adults to at least attempt to get involved in the right way:

Parents, be involved, but not too involved. In high schools, students still need their parents to rely on basically because there's not too many people out there who are willing to help you with your stuff. I think all high school students still need their parents for that solid ground when they're growing up.

High School Students Have Parents, Too attempts to examine the wisdom behind such insight. The full report, which includes an analysis of the student survey by Dr. Melanie Otis of the University of Kentucky's College of Social Work, demographic information, transcripts of interviews with policy experts, and comments from hundreds of Fayette County parents surveyed by the Youth News Team can be viewed at www.youthnewsteam.com.

We will be the first to admit there are some flaws with our data collection: Students and parents who speak English as a second language and who are classified as special needs are underrepresented; using GPA to measure academic success is an imperfect tool, and some of our survey questions were not posed in the most scientific way possible—for example. Still, we stand by our study as a viable way to engage the larger community in a research-driven discussion on an important education issue.

In addition to a treasure trove of data about the nature of the relationship between high school students and their parents in Fayette County Public Schools, the Youth News Team study shows that parents and high school students working together are a powerful force. If readers take just one thing away from this initiative, we hope it is that the greatest stakeholders in improving our schools—students and parents themselves—are also the greatest untapped resource for doing so.

--Rachel Belin, Youth News Team Director

A Word About Our Student Survey

In March 2005, the Youth News Team distributed an original 43-question survey to the student bodies of five Fayette County Public Schools during class time. Of the 5,043 surveys returned, 3,883--or 77%--were complete enough for analysis.

TABLE 1. Response Rates

School	# of Students	N	Rate	In Analysis
Dunbar	2003	1441	71.94%	877 (60.9%)
Bryan Station	1199	722	60.22%	655 (90.7%)
Henry Clay	1790	948	52.96%	887 (93.6%)
Tates Creek	1510	1188	78.67%	784 (66.0%)
Lafayette	1810	744	41.10%	680 (91.4%)

The result is a study that we hope both captures characteristics that define the academic habits of Fayette County high school students and provides some guidance on how parents and their teenage children can work together toward academic success.

The summary report of High School Students Have Parents, Too presents our key findings and recommendations together with relevant excerpts from our interviews, roundtable discussions and open-ended survey questions distributed to the students and 307 adults who completed a mail-in survey sent to 1,000 randomly selected parents.

Dr. Melanie Otis from the College of Social Work at the University of Kentucky helped us significantly with our research. The full report—including Dr. Otis' analysis of the student surveys, student and parent responses to open-ended survey questions, demographic data and full transcripts -- can be found at www.youthnewsteam.com.

KEY FINDING #1:

High school students with high GPAs are significantly more likely than lower achieving students to have parents who help them select classes.

STUDENT SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS ON COURSE SELECTION

- The students who struggle most with grades also tend to get the least guidance from parents on course selection. 69% of students with a 3.5 or higher report having parents who “frequently” or “sometimes” help them select classes but only 40% of those with GPAs below 2.0 said the same.

QUOTES OF NOTE

When we did our study of the high school family centers, we interviewed students, and they actually told us that they thought parent involvement at the high school level was more important than in any other time in their lives. And we were stunned! Because we figured they’d say, “We don’t want our parents meddling.” But they said no, that they really felt that the schools had to be more responsible about getting their parents information about their curriculum, the courses they were taking, what the expectations were from year to year...

--Dr. Karen Mapp, Director, The Institute for Responsive Education, in Youth News Team interview

If teachers have their child tracked on a low level, then when they get to high school, they’ll stay on that low level. In sixth grade, it’s the most important time. So, if parents get involved at least by the fifth grade and they make sure that, if they want their child to be in advanced classes in high school, that child has to be tracked on a high level in sixth grade. Otherwise, they hardly ever can rise above it. And so I think that’s really crucial.

--Carole Johnston, Lafayette High School teacher, in Youth News Team interview

I really wish I could consult with the counselors about my child’s course schedule. Almost every year she receives (a day before classes begin) a schedule in the mail with one requested course omitted because of schedule constraints...When a student’s requested course schedule doesn’t work out, why can’t we know sooner and have a chance to consult about it? I feel the schools want volunteer work from parents but not true involvement in the child’s education.

--Mother of junior, taking advanced classes, in Youth News Team parent survey

When my first child entered Lafayette H.S., I made an appointment with his guidance counselor and asked her numerous questions about H.S. classes, etc. She basically laid out his courses all 4 years on how she would guide him, up to Commonwealth Diploma. He listened to her and achieved in top 10 of his graduating class of 2004.

--Mother of senior, taking advanced classes, in Youth News Team parent survey

I actually didn’t get a choice in what I had. My dad met with my counselor and apparently chose all of my classes for me....It was cool. I trust him 100%.

--Freshman female, taking advanced classes, in Youth News Team interview

KEY FINDING #2:

High school students with high GPAs are much more likely than students with lower GPAs to take the most challenging math classes.

STUDENT SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS ON MATH

- In the Youth News Team Student Survey, plans to take high-level math courses were among the strongest predictors of students' GPA. The higher the goal to take demanding math classes, the higher the grades tended to be. (See Table 2a below.)
- Approximately 78% of students who indicated that they planned to take pre-Calculus or higher math classes perceived that one or more of their parents is "good at math". A question that merits further study is whether it is math skill, math confidence or some combination that parents share with high school children successful in math.

TABLE 2a. Plans to Take Challenging Math Courses by GPA

GPA < 2.0	GPA < 2.5	GPA > 3.5
Algebra II (46.0%)	Algebra II (44.8%)	Calculus (46.0%)
Geometry (14.2%)	Geometry (15.6%)	Pre-Calculus (23.1%)
Calculus (12.5%)	Calculus (14.5%)	Linear Algebra (10.6%)

TABLE 2b. Relationship Between High School Math and College Success

Highest Math Studied in High School	Percentage of H.S. Grads Earning Bachelor's
Calculus	79.8
Pre-Calculus	74.3
Trig	62.2
Algebra II	39.5
Geometry	23.1
Algebra I	7.8
Pre-Algebra	2.3

Source: www.ed.gov/pubs/Toolbox/toolbox.html

QUOTE OF NOTE

I find that telling my children to do the thing they love helps them to see that they can do anything, be anything. I never say you can't be whatever. I tell them if you love it enough, you will find a way – even if the grades are not as high as you would like. For example, my daughter loves physics but she is afraid to take a physics class because of her math skills—but she will try and she may fail. But she loves physics so I tell her to figure out a way and I will have her tutored if she loves it and wants to try.

--Mother of freshman, taking advanced classes, in Youth News Team parent survey

KEY FINDING #3:

High school students with high GPAs are significantly more likely than lower achieving students to have a comfortable place to study at home.

STUDENT SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS ON HAVING A QUIET PLACE TO STUDY

- 93% of students with GPAs of 3.5 or higher report having a comfortable place to study at home.
- Students with GPAs below 2.0 were more than twice as likely as all other students to report having no comfortable place to study at home (26% versus 11%).

QUOTES OF NOTE

I think parents need to provide a good place for their children to work. Of course when they're teenagers they want to go to their room and put on their IPOD to study. My youngest thinks that that's the way to study. Of course as a study skills person, I don't think you're supposed to be listening to music when you study, especially not in your head.

--Elise Mandel, study skills teacher and high school parent, in Youth News Team interview

My son is beginning to use his room more. Before? No. He preferred to be in the room we were all in. I don't think that works so well for him.

--Mother of sophomore, taking regular classes, in Youth News Team interview

My parents help me [with homework] by making sure that I have a place to study and it's quiet and there's not a lot of noise going on. But they don't really help me with the subject itself.

--Junior female, taking advanced classes, in Youth News Team roundtable

KEY FINDING #4:

Most high school students—regardless of GPA--do not enlist their parents to help them complete their homework.

STUDENT SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS ON HOMEWORK

- It appears that at the high school level, parents play a minimal role in helping their children complete their homework. 65% of students with GPAs of 3.5 and over and 65% of students with GPAs below 2.0 report that their parents “rarely” or “never” help them complete their homework.
- For many high school students and parents, the specter of too much homework appears to be a myth. Out of 3,883 Fayette County high school students surveyed, just 14% spent an average of 2 or more hours nightly on homework, and 31% spent fewer than 30 minutes on homework nightly.
- A comparison between the Youth News Team Student Survey and a larger national study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) suggests that Fayette County high school students should be doing a lot more studying at home if they wish to achieve academic success beyond high school.

According to the 2005 NCES study, sophomores who expected to earn a graduate or professional degree spent 7 hours per week studying while those who expected to go no further than high school spent just 3 hours a week on homework.

QUOTES OF NOTE

I think it's important for parents to shift into a different gear when they're dealing with kids that are older and be more sort of coaches and facilitators to their students. So they shouldn't be doing their homework or writing their college essays or editing and reviewing things too closely. Students really do need to be taking responsibility, doing their own work and making their own way.

--Anne Henderson, Author, *A Wave of Evidence*, in Youth News Team interview

I've had a lot more to do with sitting down and kind of pushing him to do homework, do his class work. He, because of his disability, thought he was stupid, so he felt like he couldn't do it on his own and it really wasn't until he had kind of moved through the special ed. support and gained confidence through the gifted program that he realized that he could really do this on his own.

--Mother of sophomore, taking special education and advanced classes, in Youth News Team interview

I haven't had to do a lot of participating except for doing the typical parenting of asking, you know, "What's there to do? What tests do you have this week? What papers do you have due?" That kind of thing. An occasional reading over of a paper that she's doing, going over grammar errors or anything else like that. Other than that, she's been really doing things on her own.

--Mother of senior, taking advanced classes, in Youth News Team interview

At home my parents form an overbearing supremacy that keeps me from wanting to work hard. Parents need to be supportive, or [we] need to be left alone. Such is why I'm saving my money to move out, ASAP.

--Junior male, taking regular classes, in Youth News Team student survey

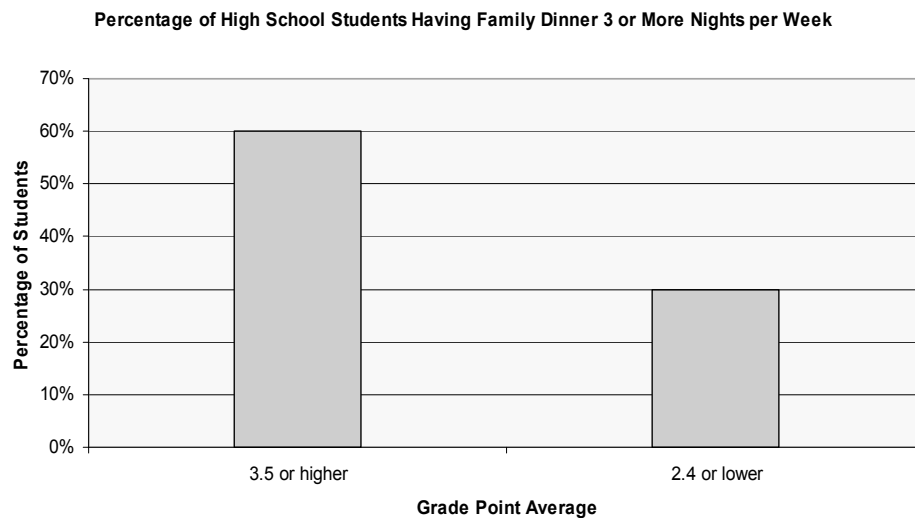
KEY FINDING #5:

High school students with the highest GPAs tend to sit down with their parents at least three nights per week for dinner.

STUDENT SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS ON FAMILY DINNER

- Sitting down to a family meal has a measurable effect on academic achievement for high school students. Approximately, 60% of Fayette County students with GPAs of 3.5 or higher reported dining with their families three or more nights a week, compared to only 31% of students reporting a GPA below 2.5 and 30% of students with a GPA below 2.0.

FIGURE 5. Percentage of Fayette High School Students Per Week Having Family Dinner by GPA



QUOTES OF NOTE

...There is interesting research that shows that sitting together and having a meal is probably the most productive family activity in terms of student achievement, more so than trips to the library or museum or concerts. Just that regular gathering together of the family, touching base. I think it helps students feel accountable to their family. I think it helps the family stay in touch, and it provides a routine that I think is important.

--Anne Henderson, Author, *A Wave of Evidence*, in Youth News Team interview

High School students need to be going home and talking to their parents about what is going on on a daily basis. This doesn't seem to be the norm with teenagers...If asked a question "What's the one thing high school students could do to get their parents involved?" I would say [it] would be to talk to them...

--Stu Silberman, Superintendent, Fayette County Public Schools, in Youth News Team interview

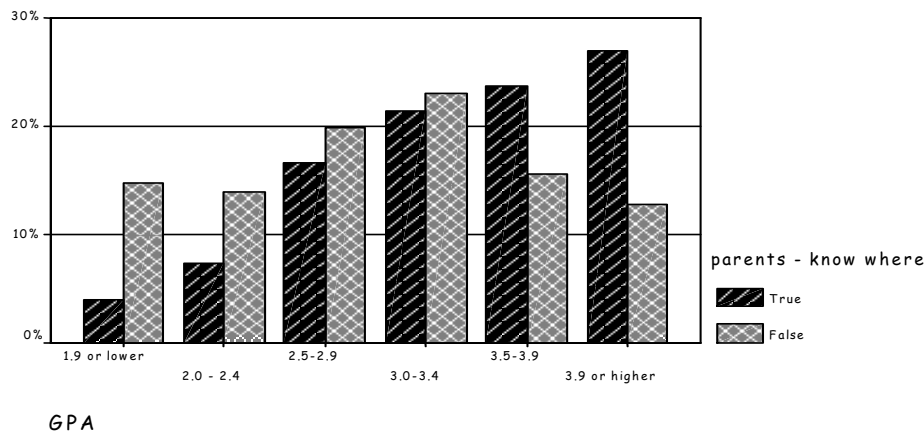
KEY FINDING #6:

The vast majority of high school students with high GPAs have parents who know where they are most of the time.

SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS ON PARENTS' KNOWLEDGE OF WHEREABOUTS

- The higher the GPA, the more likely a student was to report having parents who know their whereabouts. 92% of students with GPAs of 3.5 or higher report having parents knowing where they are “most of the time”. Just 66% of students with GPAs of 2.0 or under report the same.

FIGURE 6. Relationship Between GPA and Parents' Knowledge of Whereabouts



QUOTES OF NOTE

Keep involved in what they do. Praise them for jobs well done. Always know where they are after school. Keep them accountable. Give them boundaries even though they say they don't need them. Know who they hang around with. Curfew is a must. Be home at a reasonable hour.

--Mother of junior, taking advanced classes, in Youth News Team parent survey

I know a lot of kids who are out a lot later than their parents think they should be, and I know that sometimes I'm one of them. It's an issue of safety. The parents are concerned about their kids, and I think that's one thing we all forget, that we should take into account.

--Junior male, taking advanced classes, in Youth News Team roundtable discussion

YNT: *When you go out at night, do your parents know where you are generally?*

Student: *Yeah, they know where I'm at. Of course. They strict parents, what do you think?*

YNT: *Does it bother you that they know where you are at all times?*

Student: *I don't care! As long as they come pick me up!*

--Sophomore male, taking regular classes, in Youth News Team interview

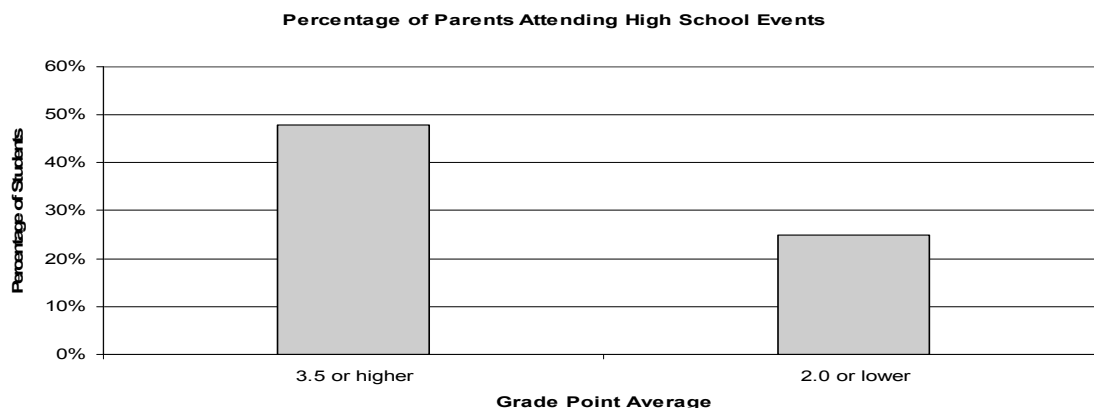
KEY FINDING #7:

High school students with the highest GPAs are significantly more likely than lower achieving students to have parents who attend school events.

STUDENT SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS ON ATTENDANCE AT SCHOOL EVENTS

- Students with GPAs of at least 3.5 are nearly twice as likely to report having parents who “sometimes” or “frequently” attend school events as students with GPAs below 2.0. (48% versus 25%).
- 61% of all students report their parents “rarely” or “never” attend school events.

FIGURE 7. Percentage of Parents Attending School Events by Student’s GPA



QUOTES OF NOTE

...In our sample, what we found was that parents who attended school programs, went to back-to-school nights, went to see their kids play in athletic events or perform in musical and theatrical events, that those kids did better in school.

--Dr. Laurence Steinberg, author, *Beyond the Classroom*, in Youth News Team interview

We ought not blame parents when parents don't come out to a function that we offer because if they are not coming out to that function then we need to look at ourselves and say that there is something we have done wrong. We have not set up or organized appropriately... You know, let's stop blaming the victim.

--Arnold Gaither, author, *One Community, One Voice*, in Youth News Team interview

A lot of times, I actually get to know the parents. I think the parents who are involved --you tend to have students who are more organized, they tend to meet deadlines a little bit better, and usually have an intrinsic desire to learn.

--Jerome Gallt, high school science teacher and coach, in Youth News Team interview

They come to my soccer games sometimes, but mostly they work. But when they can, they come. I sometimes don't notice them unless they're yelling, but you know, it's just kind of nice that they come. It makes you feel kind of special.

--Freshman female, taking advanced classes, in Youth News Team interview

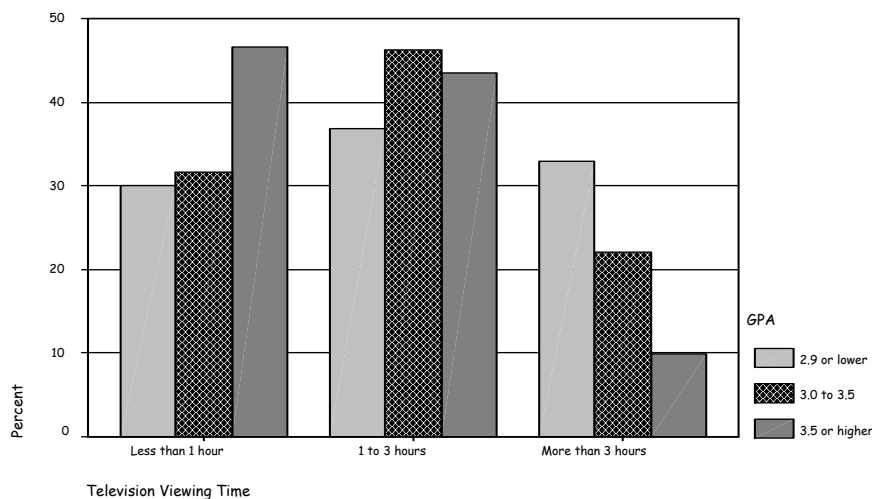
KEY FINDING #8:

High school students with the highest GPAs tend to spend one hour or less watching television each day.

STUDENT SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS ON TELEVISION HABITS

- Students with higher GPAs watch significantly less television than those with lower GPAs. Students with GPAs of 3.5 and higher most typically watch 30 minutes to one hour of television per day, while students with GPAs below 2.5 typically watch one to two hours of television each day.
- 34% of the students we surveyed report watching two or more hours of television daily.
- It appears that the majority of parents of Fayette County high school students do not closely monitor their children's television habits. 70% of the students we surveyed report having a television in their bedrooms.

FIGURE 8. Relationship between GPA and Average Time Spent Watching Television

**NATIONAL CONTEXT**

Three factors over which parents exercise authority – absenteeism, variety of reading materials in the home, and excessive television watching – explain nearly 90% of the difference in 8th grade math scores on the NAEP[National Assessment for Educational Progress] test across 37 states.

--Barton and Coley, 1992.

QUOTE OF NOTE

YNT: *Do your parents monitor the amount or type of TV that you watch?*

Student: *Not necessarily the type. But if they feel like I'm watching too much TV, they'll tell me to stop. And I understand that that's reasonable....I think because of TV watching I tend to procrastinate more.*

--Junior male, taking advanced classes, in Youth News Team interview

KEY FINDING #9:

Female high school students with the highest GPAs are significantly more likely than lower achieving females to talk to their parents about their future plans.

STUDENT SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS ON TALKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

- Nearly 55% of females with a GPA of 3.5 or higher indicated that they frequently talked to their parents about future plans, compared to approximately 26% of females with GPAs of 2.0 or less.

QUOTES OF NOTE

There's research out there now that says a very important parent engagement strategy is encouragement. The parenting style that's used that it's gotta include encouragement. To say, "I know you're smart, I know you can do it. You're going to college. We all support you."

--Dr. Karen Mapp, Director, Institute for Responsive Education, in Youth News Team interview

My dad's a college professor so, I definitely get it. You know, "Freshman year still counts; You have to get good grades." All that stuff.

--Freshman female, taking advanced, in Youth News Team interview

YNT: *Where do you see yourself about five years from now?*

Student: *Graduating college. I have about three kids, uh, I have a job as a businesswoman but I don't know what type, and I'm livin' in a house. I think I can do this with my parents' help.*

--Freshman female, taking regular classes, in Youth News Team interview

I plan to go through college and do the best I can, but I don't plan to overachieve necessarily. As an okay student, I plan to go to college and get a good job afterwards, but I don't expect to do outstandingly well in anything. I just plan to see how it goes as it goes.

--Sophomore male, taking regular classes, in Youth News Team interview

Recommendations

FOR HIGH SCHOOL PARENTS

- Understand that there is overwhelming research showing that parents who are involved in the right way in their high school children's lives can have an enormous impact on student achievement.
- Help your children select their courses each year and encourage them to take the most challenging math classes possible.
- Make sure your children have a quiet place to study.
- Help your children at home with school assignments by showing an interest in their work and confidence in their abilities to complete them.
- Sit down to a meal with your children as often as possible and discuss what happened during everyone's day.
- Reserve the right to know where your children are at all times.
- Seize every opportunity to attend school events with your children.
- Research postsecondary options with your child and support him or her to pursue them even if *you* never did.
- Limit television for your high school children to one hour or less per day.
- Talk with your children regularly about life after high school.

Recommendations

FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

- Understand that there is overwhelming research showing that parents who are involved in the right way in their high school children's lives can have an enormous impact on student achievement.
- Involve your parents in selecting your courses each year; take the most challenging courses you can—particularly math classes--without worrying about how they might affect your grade point average.
- Ask your parents to help you create or find a quiet place to study.
- Let your parents know when you are studying for important tests or completing major assignments. Encourage them to encourage you.
- Sit down with your family for a meal as much as possible. Make it yourself if you have to.
- Personally invite your parents to attend school events with you.
- Avoid the temptation of watching more than one hour of television each day. If you have a television in your bedroom, get rid of it.
- Keep your parents posted on your plans for the future—especially if they are constantly evolving. Encourage them to explore your postsecondary options with you even if they themselves never went beyond high school.

Recommendations

FOR HIGH SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS AND POLICYMAKERS

- Share research showing the importance of parents in the lives of high school students with students and parents at the start of every school year.
- Facilitate forums during which parents and high school students can directly discuss issues relating to the role of parents in supporting high school achievement. Feature a panel of successful high school students and the parents behind them.
- Find new and engaging ways to blur rigid lines separating home and school and make families a more welcome part of high school education.
- Develop ways of measuring parent involvement in helping high school students achieve in school that reflect how parents can and do support their high school children at home.

Final Thoughts from the Youth News Team

Bill, parent: Parental involvement falls off exponentially after primary school because, in my opinion, it is so much harder. Parents and high school students need to rekindle their relationship.

Kim, parent: One of the things I learned in our investigation was that all parents didn't realize how important it was to be involved with your student and their work at high school.

Debra, parent: We found out that it's just as important to be involved at the high school level as at the elementary level. I have a senior and also a ninth grader and a third grader. And whatever I didn't do, I want to be able to know what I can do when the others reach high school.

Emily, student: I was surprised at how much parent involvement can affect a student's success in high school. This study really shows the extent of the effects parents have on their children. I think the title *High School Students Have Parents, Too* is telling people it is still important for you to be involved with older students.

Amy, parent: By doing this report, I wanted to learn what to do with my own children when they're in high school. I wanted also to be able to share the recommendations with my school community.

Tiffany, student: We hope to bring this study to the community and make some changes in the way parents and students relate to each other.

Casandra, student: We, the Youth News Team, are the parents and students and that gives us the right to issue this report. We're the ones being affected the most.

Michelle, graduate student intern: I think there's a lot of confusion by high school students and parents as to what it means to be involved and so, hopefully, through the findings of this qualitative and quantitative analysis that we've been doing, it could help answer some questions.

Dennis, parent: We got nearly 4000 surveys out of high schools that most university researchers can't get any surveys out of because they don't have high school students working with them. The people who aren't using high school students as part of their team are actually at a disadvantage. Policies are always better when multiple points of view are considered. Parents and students are often just as intelligent, capable, and concerned about the school's success as administrators and teachers. Why waste a perfectly good—and free--resource?

Acknowledgements

A number of people contributed to this study, and the Youth News Team is grateful to every one of them. Our deepest thanks to:

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Contact Information

For more information about the Youth News Team and this report, contact:



Mahjabeen Rafiuddin
The Kentucky Conference for Community and Justice
112 N. Upper Street
Lexington, Kentucky 40507
Phone: (859) 255-6999
E-mail: mrafiuddin@kccjky.org
Web: www.kccjky.org

Or

Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence

Rachel Belin
Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence
P.O. Box 1658
Lexington, Kentucky 40588-1658
Phone: (859) 233-9849 ext. 233
Toll Free: (800) 928-2111
E-mail: rbelin@prichardcommittee.org
Web: www.prichardcommittee.org

Or

Rachel Belin, Youth News Team Director
rachelburg@post.harvard.edu
www.youthnewsteam.com